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A HALF-CENTURY OF BIBLICAL AND SEMITIC INVESTIGATION

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"We have thus far been, at the best, spectators of the battle that has raged on the continent of Europe. . . . The Providence of God now calls us to take part in the conflict. . . . We should prepare ourselves at once." These sentiments have nothing to do with the present war. They are the words of that great conservative, the late Charles Augustus Briggs, of Union Theological Seminary, when referring to the progress of Old Testament studies in the English-speaking world. In full, the passage reads: "We have thus far been, at the best, spectators of the battle that has raged on the continent of Europe over the biblical books. The Providence of God now calls us to take part in the conflict. Our Anglo-American scholars are but poorly equipped for the struggle. We should prepare ourselves at once."¹

If these words may be taken as a fair index of the state of biblical study in England and America when they were written, in 1882, they apply with very much greater force to 1866. Indeed, we may describe the condition of biblical studies in the English-speaking world at that time as one of splendid isolation.

As late as 1862 the leading English churchmen, ably seconded by American divines, were proceeding upon the theory that the waters which cut off England from the Continent, and much more, of course, those that separated Europe from America, were a sufficient protection for peace-loving orthodoxy against any invasion of Teutonic higher criticism. Occasionally the more daring English theologians visited Germany and brought home specimens of higher critical fauna which were promptly mounted and put on exhibition as examples of strange and dangerous monsters from the "dark continent," while those who accomplished such feats were duly given high rank in a class with Nimrod.

¹ *Biblical Study*, pp. 212 f.

The Anglo-Saxon theologians managed this matter of the German critics with firmness and dispatch, but they failed to take corresponding precautions against the natives of South Africa. When therefore a great missionary of the Anglican church was made bishop of Natal, it became one of his first tasks to translate the Scriptures into the vernacular; and he had not proceeded beyond the story of the Flood when those trustful, simple-minded Zulus asked such frank and wondering questions about the reality of the accounts in Genesis that the bishop, being an honest man, felt obliged to reconsider the whole status of the Pentateuch, and to this end ordered sent out from Europe the critical apparatus of the leading biblical scholars on the Continent. The result was that in 1862 Colenso's book¹ appeared, and in this work there were presented in English dress the chief results of German higher criticism, plus a still more advanced contribution by an English bishop. This attack in the rear, via the heathen, was as effective as it was disconcerting. The English and American presses groaned with replies, but this hastily improvised defense was chiefly conspicuous for its defective marksmanship. It was, however, the best that could be done with the weapons at hand. Through this experience, then, it became evident at last to all thinking men that any supposed biblical isolation was in reality a groundless and misleading assumption. Nevertheless, twenty years were to elapse before Dr. Briggs's "call to preparedness" could be issued.

The status of Old Testament studies fifty years ago may be summarized in terms of Pentateuchal criticism. Continental scholarship had at that time reached a consensus of opinion that the Hexateuch was composed of four documents, and English and American scholars were unable to set aside the evidence.

From the very nature of the Occident, Semitic studies outside the Old Testament are limited in general interest to such as have a more or less direct bearing on biblical subjects. In this respect Assyriology from the start was without a rival, and still holds the main field; and there is a real sense in which 1866 marked an epoch, for it was the year in which Edward Hincks, devoted pioneer, brilliant decipherer, and coadjutor with Rawlinson, passed away. Oppert, Hincks, and

¹ *The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined.*

Rawlinson had made their joint translation, convincing the world that the key to the Babylonian literature had been found. The ideographic and polyphonous character of cuneiform had been demonstrated, and a beginning had been made on Sumerian. The search for Babylonian curios and works of art had resulted in the discovery of the imposing gateway to a new language; and the first dim outlines of a long-buried civilization had begun to arise from the mounds of Mesopotamia.

The decade 1866-76 was notable both in Old Testament and Assyrian research, and the advances made in each were mutually stimulating. In Old Testament study the decade was marked by the effort to determine the date and order of the documents, and particularly to settle upon the *Grundschrift*. An entirely new perspective of Israel's whole development was in the making, everything depending upon the order of the documents.¹ This order was first stated in a form to gain wide and lasting adherence by Wellhausen in 1876,² and the way was now open to bring the history of Israel into line with universal history.

In 1870 the growing interest in the archaeology of the Bible led to the founding of the Society of Biblical Archaeology. The influence of this society upon Semitic studies has been especially noteworthy, and among the first contributors to its *Transactions* appeared the name of George Smith, already rising to prominence. His discovery, in the British Museum in 1872, of the eleventh tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic, from which he soon deciphered unmistakable parallels to the story of the Flood in Genesis, marks an epoch. It was at this point that the mutually stimulating effects of the two disciplines first became manifest. It was one thing to have unearthed an unexplored area of human development; it was quite another to find this new record to be in some way directly bound up with the most venerable sacred literature of Christendom. Out of this connection the Old Testament was to gain a new perspective of at least three thousand years of political and religious background. It was not necessary that the full extent or the exact nature of the relation should

¹ Graf, *Die geschichtlichen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (1886); Kuenen, *Gottesdienst von Israel* (1869-70); Duhn, *Theologie der Propheten* (1869); Kayser, *Vorexilisches Buch der Urgeschichte* (1874); Reuss, *L'Histoire sainte et la Loi*.

² *Jahrbuch für Deutsche Theologie*.

be realized at first, in order to assure a new interest in all things pertaining to *Bibel und Babel*.

This new impetus found expression at once in fresh excavations, carried on by Smith himself, and these were to be an index of the new emphasis on excavation for nearly a generation. The clay tablets and inscriptions that hitherto had scarcely been considered as worthy of enumeration now began to be regarded as the chief objects of search; and hand in hand with the unearthing of tablets and the publication of texts went the scientific unfolding of the language, under the leadership, particularly, of Friedrich Delitzsch, scholars no longer relying chiefly on other Semitic languages for root meanings, but determining them for the most part from the usage in Assyrian itself. It was a significant coincidence that in 1876 the Old Testament began to be seen, for the first time, as an orderly development wrought into the newly discovered setting of a larger civilization. The work of the succeeding forty years has been but the verifying, deepening, and enlarging of that proposition, both in its terms and in their most varied aspects.

There were two sources that could cause new developments. The one consisted of material in the Old Testament itself that lay hidden beneath theological formalism and under defective lexicon and fluctuating textual tradition. Discoveries of this character have been many, some of them brilliant; and more are awaited. The other source depended on the recovery of fresh material from the sites of ancient civilizations that had influenced Israel; and the latter was basic, since it involved new facts that compelled attention. The story of the progress of Old Testament and Semitics from this point cannot omit some account of the gains of Semitic archaeology.

The fresh impetus that started with the discoveries of George Smith brought a vast increase of priceless treasures to the British Museum and the Louvre, and the same wave of interest reached America in 1884 and found expression in the Wolfe expedition. Sufficient materials had already been recovered to cause revolutionary changes, but it was only the beginning. In 1887-88 the Tel-el-Amarna tablets came to light, and their translation rang up the curtain on all Western Asia for the fourteenth century B.C. Here was an international postal service between Egypt and Syria-

Palestine, the Hittites, Cyprus, Mitanni, Assyria, and Babylonia, and an extensive diplomatic correspondence carried on between these governments, in cuneiform Babylonian as a *lingua franca*, showing in most intimate fashion the inner relations of the governments concerned, by acknowledged suzerainty, treaties, alliances, and mutual understandings, and revealing the whole area to have been, in reality, one great political complex.¹ This literature gave the first clear view of Palestine before Israel was in possession of the land, and showed it to be already in a relatively high state of civilization and also involved in the main stream of world-politics. It was the earliest political world-view to be obtained from any single body of ancient literature, and it was so full and suggestive that if there still remained those who would fain persuade themselves that Israel could continue to be studied in isolation, this discovery gave the deathblow to such fancies. It was also evident that Babylonian culture to some considerable extent dominated Western Asia as early as the fourteenth century B.C.

These splendid results led to new and extended efforts. In America the new interest crystallized in the Babylonian expedition of the University of Pennsylvania, which in three campaigns from 1888 to 1896 recovered over 31,000 tablets, besides other monuments.²

In 1894, at Abu Habba, the Turks for the first and only time ceased to lay hindrances in the way of excavation and for a brief season wielded the spade themselves, with gratifying results. From 1888 to 1891 the Berlin Oriental Committee carried on work near Antioch, that resulted in the recovery of the Zenjirli inscriptions, which furnished a new historical link between Assyria and Israel.

Thus far from the days of George Smith the search for written records overshadowed all else, but the progress of decipherment and historical reconstruction gradually made it clear that the exact provenance of a document was second only to the record itself. In the haste of the earlier excavating to get tablets with the least effort, partially excavated areas were frequently buried again with debris from new openings. The task of thorough excavation to

¹ Knudtzon, *Die el-Amarna Tafeln* (1908).

² Hilprecht, *Die Ausgrabungen der University of Pennsylvania*, etc.

determine historical perspective and architectural development had not yet been undertaken. The first site to be systematically cleared was that of Telloh, by the indefatigable Frenchman, DeSarzec, who labored upon the one mound for over twenty years.¹ The Germans had made unique contributions to the interpretation of the inscriptions, but they alone of the great modern nations had done almost no digging. The formation of the German Orient Society in 1898 marked the entrance of Germany into this field, and since that date their methods have become standard.² The new emphasis on architecture and exact plotting of ruins has as greatly increased the seriousness of excavation as it has enhanced the value of the results.

The expedition of the University of Chicago, which began work at the ancient city of Adab on Christmas Day, 1903, offered good promise of success, and for the brief space of five months during which work was actually carried on gave very encouraging results. The work was prematurely cut short, however, and here American participation in Babylonian excavation comes to an end.

Of all the nations engaged in this work probably the French have been most constantly in the field. To their credit must be placed the finest early Sumerian collection; but above all it was their good fortune to discover at Susa the great stele of Hammurapi's Code of law.³ This marks the third great normative Babylonian contribution to the interpretation of the Old Testament. Its exact relation to the Mosaic legislation, coming centuries later, is still an intricate problem,⁴ but in any case, as a result, the study of Israelite law has taken on new aspects of the highest importance.

The influence of Babylonian discoveries has stimulated activity in many other fields and it was inevitable that Palestine's turn should come sooner or later. The excavations of Macalister at Gezer, of Sellin at Jericho, and of Reisner at Samaria represent the best type of work. No such spectacular results have been obtained from this field; as has been well said, the fault is not with the excavators but with the people of Canaan. They did not do the spectacular

¹ Hilprecht, *The Excavations in Assyria and Babylonia*, pp. 216 ff.

² Koldewey, *Das wiedererstehende Babylon*, etc.; Andrae in *MDOG*, 1909, 1913.

³ R. F. Harper, *The Code of Hammurabi*.

⁴ Cf. Johns, *The Relations between the Laws of Babylonia and the Laws of the Hebrew Peoples*.

things to be recorded. This is not, however, to minimize the significance of these labors.

This survey would in no sense be complete without mention of the Aramaic papyri discovered at Assouan and Elephantine.¹ Twice Semitic archaeology has been indebted to Upper Egypt for most important items. Thanks to these documents, our conception of the Jewish community in the fifth century B.C. is no longer confined to the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. We are now able to see another social and religious center of Israelite influence at work, independent of Deuteronomy or the Priestly Code.

The progress of Old Testament interpretation and of wider Semitic studies, based on the results of excavation, has not always been direct, nor have the two branches always been mutually supporting. Too often archaeology has been asked to play the rôle of an apologist. Semitic archaeology started on its career with the serious handicap of being supposed to confirm whatever views one might hold concerning the Bible and the universe, and it has not yet entirely freed itself from this disadvantage. There is today a science of archaeology; its business is to gather up the physical remains of the past and from them restore as far as possible a view of the course of past development. There is no scientific application of such data to biblical interpretation apart from the work of the critical historian. To say this is to set aside a very large mass of apologetics that is wont to pose as archaeology. But Semitic archaeology itself has not been without its false alarms and mistaken trails that have led no whither, and that have clouded the main issue. The unfortunate Sumerian controversy,² now happily closed, in which one man was able to hold the field against the rest of Semitic scholarship for twenty-five years, shows a very halting progress, due in large measure to extravagant claims made on both sides on the basis of insufficient data. The keen search for archaeological clues has developed, in some instances, oversensitive and uncontrolled imaginations, that have resulted in such confusion of fact and fancy as the North Arabian mirage of Egypt—that rare phenomenon of archaeological weather. The theory of that ghostly but ubiquitous tribe of

¹ Sachau, *Aramäisches Papyrus u. Ostraka*, etc. (1911).

² Rogers, *History* I, 254 f.

Jerahmeel, supposed to lurk under every rubbish-heap of Hebrew consonants, that ability to discern in many an otherwise good Hebrew form of respectable lineage only a Jerahmeelite wolf in Hebrew clothing, is another example of distorted vision confused with a high degree of scientific acumen. The greatest obsession in Semitic studies is probably included in the cult of the pan-Babylonian astral theorists, which would reduce all early Semitic history, literature, and religion to Babylonian astrological formulae. It is an astonishing example of the tangential reasoning that may arise from the usually close-knit, severely logical, German thinking. It is to be observed that its chief advocates have not been first of all Old Testament scholars; but almost invariably have made their approach by way of late Babylonian astrology; and, as one result, they have been able to see in the Old Testament only a shifting kaleidoscope with which to entertain the imagination.

Such aberrations, in spite of evident disadvantages, have not been an unmixed evil. Their retardation of progress has served to check a too-hasty advance, and their vagaries have brought into stronger relief the actual problems at hand.

The positive gains from Semitic archaeology may be evaluated, in relation to the Old Testament, first of all in terms of Pentateuchal criticism. The documentary hypothesis which makes the priestly legislation the latest element has met with no rebuff from archaeology; at the same time certain items unmistakably confirm it, such as the variant Babylonian accounts of the Creation and the Flood which correspond to the biblical; or the archaeology of Palestine, that leaves no room for the Deuteronomic or priestly accounts of the "conquest"; or the excavations at Gezer and Taanach, Levitical cities according to P, which show that the priestly writer was unaware of the early religious history of those cities.

There has been no serious attack on the documentary hypothesis in a generation. Dahse, in his recent pericope theory,¹ has indeed shown how the preliminary criterion of the divine names in Genesis might be scientifically challenged, but, in spite of interesting facts adduced, he has failed even to maintain his thesis, as the admirable criticisms of Skinner have shown.²

¹ *Textkritische Materialien zur Hexateuchfrage.*

² *Expositor* (1913).

Textual criticism, through the merited recognition and use of the versions, has made important gains, recorded in improved lexicons, and has received popular recognition, to a certain extent, in the English and American Revised Versions.

The greatest religious advance contributed by Old Testament study has come as an indirect result of the Pentateuchal analysis, namely, the recovery and restoration of the prophetic religion to its proper place as the creator and not the product of the law, thus restoring the moral perspective of Israel's entire religious development.

Finally, English and American scholarship has responded to Dr. Briggs's call for biblical preparedness and efficient religious leadership, not indeed against German teaching, nor yet as its slavish imitator, but in collaboration with the best thought of the Continent. The leadership in America in Old Testament Semitics today rests in the hand of no man, and perhaps in no institution; but the commanding position which enlightened biblical leadership enjoys in this country is due in no small measure to the impetus given it by one Old Testament scholar. Sound learning, religious devotion, and the teacher instinct were an essential part of this contribution, but they do not account for the result. That can only be explained by the genius that inspires and that communicates its own spirit like contagion. The preparation for this result came when W. R. Harper accepted the call to Morgan Park in 1879 and decided to devote his life to Old Testament and Semitics. Within five years he had laid the foundations of the present American Institute of Sacred Literature, the *Biblical World*, and the *American Journal of Semitic Languages*. Of the first it has been said that perhaps more than any other single agency it has had influence in extending a knowledge of the Bible. The two journals were speedily to acquire national and even international importance. These far-reaching organized efforts, coupled with his national rejuvenation of Hebrew and doubly accentuated by his position as organizer and president of the University of Chicago, in which exacting and absorbing office he, nevertheless, continued to be the same inspiring teacher and investigator, have wrought his spirit into the very marrow of much of the higher religious leadership of this country, and have made his

multiple life-work also one of the deeply fascinating chapters in the story of fifty years of Old Testament progress.¹

What of the future? The world has learned more of the Old Testament and wider Semitics in the past fifty years than had been previously gained in nineteen centuries. Who could have foretold the revelations of this period? It is unnecessary, however, to prophesy. There still remain unfinished tasks greater than those that have been accomplished.

In the first place, all the excavating in Babylonia, so far, is but a pin-scratch compared to all that still lies untouched. Systematic excavation in Palestine has just been well begun. The lacunae in Babylonian and Palestinian history are deep and widespread. The social and commercial history of Babylonia remains to be written. Present reconstructions are only tentative for whole areas. The secret of Sumerian civilization awaits its proper linking with the deeper past.

The excavations at Boghaz Kõi have at last assured a scientific solution of the Hittite problem. Dr. Friedrich Hrozný has established for himself the right to be known as the decipherer of the Hittite language.² With this key we shall now be able to enter into many hitherto closed areas of Oriental history.

Every day we are learning more of Egypt, Israel's next-door neighbor, and with that knowledge the problems of the patriarchs, the Exodus, Moses, and the settlement of Canaan are closely bound up. The best Old Testament data on all these points are of such variable and shifting character that possible variations of from two to four hundred years have to be admitted,³ and it is difficult to see how that historical definiteness can be gained apart from new inscriptional material, most naturally of Egyptian origin. With a little real light on the Hyksos, for example, or if we knew exactly where Israel of the Merneptah stele was, whether in Palestine, as is commonly assumed, or only in the neighborhood, many things

¹ Francis Brown, "President Harper and Old Testament Studies," *AJSL*, XXII.

² See his preliminary announcement in *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft*, December, 1915, together with the added words of endorsement by Otto Weber and Eduard Meyer, in the same issue.

³ J. M. P. Smith, "Some Problems in the Early History of Hebrew Religion," *AJSL* (January, 1916).

would be surer. Much more than the small modicum that here might be decisive may assuredly be expected.

Textual criticism has unwound a few items from the LXX tangle. The whole skein awaits unraveling, even if it be, in the end, to show how little it can yield.

The languages of the Old Testament await a more rapid and efficient means of mastery, that shall not be inconsistent with curriculum requirements, except for a handful of special students. The text back of our present defective *textus receptus* must be diligently and patiently sought by every means, especially by a thorough sifting of all the treasures of Jewish tradition, a task for which Ehrlich's great work points the way.¹ The apocryphal literature must be more fully restored to its true place as the epilogue of the Old and the prologue of the New Covenant.

The religion of the Old Testament must prepare more fully to take its place in the discipline of the history of religion, laying aside all pleas for its unnatural character, and from this viewpoint seek new light for a variety of otherwise meaningless passages and wise obscurities of exegesis. The religion of the older prophets demands to be studied in its deeper relations to the prophet of Nazareth as the best and truest unified basis for the religion of the future.

¹ *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel*, etc.